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ABSTRACT

This brief paper describes how staff at the United Methodist Nursery School in Naperville, Illinois structured leavetaking experiences, such as school entry and exit times, for children, parents and staff to reduce problems associated with separation, attachment and loss. (Author/RH)

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Growth Through Separation:

The United Methodist Nursery School (Naperville, Illinois) as a Model

As young children move from home into nursery school, natural opportunities for growth through separation are present. Separation implies feeling-bonds that are to be lengthened or cut. Two significant separations are certain each school year: in the fall, from mother and home; in the spring, from teachers, classmates, and school. Additional "in-school" separations occur when teachers or children leave and when a guinea pig dies. Feelings about other separations in the family and the community come to school with the child and the parent.

The United Methodist Nursery School has a population of 110 children in one-, two-, or three-day morning programs. The majority of the children are homebased, from two-parent families, with mothers who do not work. Seven classes meet through the week, each with two professional teachers. There are two classes of eight parent-child diads that meet once a week; two classes of 16 three year olds that meet twice a week; one class of 18 three and four year olds that meets three days a week; two classes of 20 four year olds that meet three days a week. Classes for three and four year old children have one participating parent each day and often a student teacher. Each class meets in two large rooms in one of three local United Methodist churches. One room is the "large muscle" room; the other contains traditional nursery school equipment and the children flow back and forth according to their choices of activity.

Ten years ago we were deeply committed to persuading our governing board to allow scheduled time for home visits, in-school conferences, and a gradual beginning in class. Three years later the teachers were so

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convinced of the value of this scheduling that even though home visit week was subsequently dropped from the school calendar, they continued to plan home visits in late August on their own time.

Other than an end-of-the-year picnic in each class, the distributing of personal books containing dictated stories, poems and snapshots of persons and events throughout the year, and scattered discussions with children about the end of the school year, we were not strongly focused on ways of helping the children learn through leaving nursery school. We built in strong supports for children and parents separating as they entered school and continued this throughout the year. Parental bonds were gradually lengthened as the children formed new bonds with their teachers and classmates. Several years ago, one of the teachers shared a May night's dream with the staff. 'She was driving a bus around town, sadly weeping inside, dropping each of her children off at his/her home. It felt as abrupt as falling off a cliff.'

We began to compare our disregard for the children's separation from ourselves (their teachers) and their friends with our carefully planned beginning. Each had built strong bonds, as this was one of our stated objectives: to provide a safe atmosphere wherein children could trust and form attachments. We began with an end-of-the-year conference week. Each child came with his/her parent(s) to discuss growth which had occurred, strengths evidenced, areas where the child was working and struggling. Every child, parent and teacher could thus say a personal individual good-bye. Children occasionally refused to talk and expressed anger by keeping their backs turned. Staff felt sad, accepted and spoke to the naturalness of this anger and bid the child farewell. Parents were disturbed at this,

wishing for a happy ending. Interpretation sometimes helped in understanding anger as a component of leavetaking; sometimes it did not.

Class picnics and field trips were scheduled earlier in May so that the children could have a peaceful relaxed time together as close to ordinary as possible the last week(s) of school. Generally children coped with the stress of leaving by regressing to earlier less mature patterns of behavior. A flurry of "goodbye" activities appeared to add stress and increase regressive behavior. Simple, quiet one-to-one discussions and small group discussions were helpful. In the spring of 1979, we began using Judy's book My Teacher Said Goodbye Today. This was read and discussed with small groups of children throughout April and May to help the children anticipate the end of school.

Four year old children are aware that when they are five they will go to kindergarten but unsure as to the when. Some believe on their fifth birthday and bid us 'farewell' although they seem relieved to find they're staying the rest of the year. In April, kindergarten round-ups renew thoughts of 'real' school in the fall. To aid and abet the imaginative play through which young children move into new situations several school desks furnished with pencil-paper materials are brought in and grouped in a quiet area. Most everyone in class practices standing in line regularly. Even so, Matt and Cary were overheard chatting as they built with blocks. Matt: "I'm going to kindergarten." Cary, surprised: "You are? Me, too!" Their ability to generalize from their own knowledge to know about a classmate is still extremely limited.

We, the staff, are evolving new ways to help children anticipate leaving school. Now as we begin in April talking about school ending,

children use the time afforded to express and dissipate some of the sad and angry feelings. They no longer need to turn their backs at the end-of-the-year conference. Time for a gradual ending is as essential to children in separating from school as is a gradual beginning.

Basic patterns of separating, laid down in these years, are associated throughout life with feelings present during early leavetakings. Young children are particularly vulnerable to fears of abandonment as they are totally dependent. A serious loss of trust in his/her primary caregiver occurs when the child, alone, is too abruptly thrust into new and strange situations with unknown persons. The overwhelming anxiety engendered interferes with his/her ability to relate to teachers and classmates in constructive ways and to use the program offered. A concurrent diminution of self-confidence results in loss of autonomy and initiative.

Young children are deeply imbedded in their families. Parents are of primary importance to the child; to benefit the child, school supplements the family by enabling warm and abiding parent-child relationships. Toddlers begin separating in parent-child class with their primary caregiver close by to return to as they feel a need to do so. Three, four, and five year old children entering nursery school have their mothers available to them in school through their first gradual days and/or weeks until they feel sure enough to separate and manage alone. Parent participation on a regular basis validates the school experience for the child and defines as it moderates the separation. As parents and teachers learn to know and respect each other, bonding together, they are able to offer consistent support to the child struggling with separation.

Successful patterns of separating are individual in nature; each

person-to-person relationship is unique, occurring solely between the two individuals involved. Young children need sensitive ongoing support to find ways, each his/her own, of coping with the feelings engendered by the losses of separation. Each child requires respectful attention paid to his/her feelings, safety and clear permission to express the sadness, anger, and mourning involved, and time to move at his/her own pace in coming to terms with the inner loss and external changes necessary.

Teachers at United Methodist Nursery School having accrued to themselves a well-integrated experiential and theoretical (human development) background, live with children through countless daily moments, responsive to and respectful of children's feelings and behavior. These same teachers clearly in touch with and owning the full range of their feelings, convey in manner, language, and behavior, safety and permission for children to own and express the full range of their feelings. A gradual flexible schedule provides for differing times children need to accommodate separation.

The teachers, because of their whole-hearted dedication, require consistent supportive services enabling them to freely offer their professional services to children and parents throughout each year without undue burnout! The closeness and mutuality of staff relationships unifies staff members and allows them to act as a resource to one another. The director, myself, and the staff consultant, a psychiatric social worker, are additional resource persons available to staff members for observing in the classroom, for consultation, in yearly ten-week staff seminars, and bimonthly staff meetings. The nursery school staff shares a professional commitment to and understanding of the developmental needs of young children and their families, including the need to successfully separate and

grow in independence.

Separation and attachment are essential repetitive tasks of all human beings. Children engaged in these awesome tasks are deserving of the most excellent models and assistance possible.

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One Chronological Year: scheduling with opportunities for successful attachment and separation

Spring -- Child visits classrooms with parent for one hour
Parent interview with director: parent expectations, wishes for child, explanation of program

July -- School Calendar and Know-Your-Child forms mailed to parents to be filled out, request return by August 1

August -- Two teachers read Know-Your-Child forms--home visit each child and parent--take snapshot of child, mother (siblings), begin anecdotal notes on each child. Meeting teachers in the security of home builds initial bonds.

September

Labor Day Week--Child-Parent-Teacher conferences--appointments in one classroom. Meeting teachers in classroom alone with parent(s) strengthens feelings of safety in knowing them.

Large muscle room set up so parent may bring enrolled child to play during regular nursery class hours--see and use space, equipment and meet one or two classmates

Second week-- Begin bimonthly staff meetings

Fall Parents Meeting: 7:30 p.m. (film) Teachers, Parents, and Children Cooperating--general discussion of roles, expectations

1st day of class 1/2 class 1 hour; 1/2 class 1 hour

2nd day of class whole class 1 1/2 hours

3rd day of class whole class 2 hours

4th day of class whole class 2 1/2 hours

Home visit snapshots mounted at location of home on map of town--low bulletin board for maps, pictures, allows children to see

Security of parent remaining as child needs, shortened day and smaller group permit child to successfully move into school.

Fourth week--Conversation with teacher: class parents a.m. coffee with class teacher (director works in class with other teacher) discuss parent questions, expectations. Sharing is a resource to parents. Knowing each other better helps teacher, parents, and ultimately children.

October

First Tuesday--all parents a.m. Film Series: Child Language: Learning Without Teaching--Discussion around specific questions raised by parents concerning their child's language development.

Third or fourth Saturday morning--Saturday at Nursery School--child invites, brings father or another male. Opportunity to share with the special male in her/his life satisfying for child, helps adult to understand child's conversation about school.

Fourth week--Conversation with teacher: Class parents a.m. coffee with teacher.

End of October--Child moving to Boston. Teachers have made book for child using magazine and travel folder pictures including process of moving and new location. This has been looked at and read to children over past weeks. U.S. map with route to new home is posted on low bulletin board. A field trip was taken to moving company to explore empty moving vans.

November

First Tuesday all parents a.m. Film Series: Sand: Sensory, perceptual, intellectual play opportunities of sand. Discussion questions concerning parent-child relationships rather than film content.

New child accompanied by parent enters class on gradual schedule: for one hour visit first day, adding 1/2 hour each day until full 2 1/2 hours--teachers and mother plan together how long mother need attend as both observe child.

First week--Family open house for each class in child's classroom much enjoyed by parents and siblings as they join child in activities or choose own; being in classrooms enhances communication about school.

Third week--Teachers put together small booklet of nursery school class songs for each child to take home--parents and child can sing songs together.

December

First Tuesday--all parents a.m. Film Series: Blocks: A Medium for Perceptual Learning--Quality of reality in imaginative play as children gain mastery over their own ideas. Discussion questions concerning spatial, mathematical possibilities

Christmas--related activities kept to a minimum. Children use enriched program of age-appropriate activities as ongoing oasis. Tensions of unrealistic expectations increase as commercial exploitation increases. Silhouette profile of each child is sent home as Christmas gift.

No visitors to nursery school are scheduled after first week of December or in first week in January.

January

Teachers begin weekly seminar with consulting social worker through second week of March.

Parent-teacher conferences: scheduled in afternoon or evening as parent(s) choose. Teachers listen to parents' description of child, hear their concerns, honestly describe child's growth, strengths, behavior using anecdotal observations as illustrations.

Fourth week--conversation with teacher: class parents a.m. coffee with class teacher.

Guinea pig dies: Dead guinea pig in cloth-lined shoe box available in classroom for at least one week (kept in freezer out of class). Children may touch, hold, carry, examine, question, discuss, mourn in their own time and way. Dead Bird and Ten Good Things About Barney read and talked about. Guinea buried in play yard with flowers planted if weather permits. No new guinea secured for one month or longer.

February

First Tuesday--all parents a.m. Film Series: Childrens' Aggression: Its Origin and Control. Aggressive behavior, normal though disturbing, and effective management allowing the child to develop self-control.

Fourth week--conversation with teacher: class parents a.m. coffee with class teacher.

March

Spring Parents Meeting 7:30 p.m.

Third Week--Dr. Jesse Potter, The Oedipal Years (3-5)
Supportive of parents in grasping that their child, beset by conflicting feelings, needs consistent befriending by understanding parents.

April

First Tuesday--all parents a.m. Film Series: Child's Play and the Real World--developmental structure of play through different ages.

Four year old classes--kindergarten round-ups
Begin reading My Teacher Said Goodbye Today by Judy Osborne--
move in school desks, stand in lines occasionally, talk one-to-one or in small groups about the end of school.

May

First Tuesday--all parents a.m. Film Series: Ego Development:
The Core of a Healthy Personality--description of elements
which lead to a healthy ego.

Three year old classes--begin reading My Teacher Said Goodbye Today. One to one discussions of leaving.

First week--The last week for picnics and/or field trips.

Second week--Regular in-school activities (last week of class).

Third week--Child-Parent-Teacher conferences: to discuss child's
present behavior and growth and to say goodbye. Child takes
his/her personal book with own dictated stories, poems, etc.
and snapshots of year's events home.